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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000211

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: ISLAMIST GROUP OVERACHIEVER AMONG POLITICAL
PARTIES IN SIDR RELIEF

Classified By: CDA a.i. Geeta Pasi. Reason: 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: A recent USG interagency visit to southern Bangladesh to assess Cyclone Sidr damage found the Islamist political party Jamaat-e-Islami as active in providing relief as the two main secular parties of Bangladesh, if not more so. Jamaat has a multifaceted relief program that involves handing out cash grants and teaming up with Islamic non-governmental organizations to distribute basic necessities. However, the scope of Jamaat's assistance pales in comparison to the government's relief program and targets primarily its own supporters, suggesting that the party's local appeal is unlikely to receive a significant boost from the cyclone response. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Jamaat is the main Islamist political party in Bangladesh. Its leaders say the party is committed to democracy and renounces terrorism. They say the party's top goal is the social and economic development of Bangladesh and the reduction of poverty, but they also acknowledge their ultimate goal is to introduce sharia law and to otherwise give Islam a more central role in national life. In the 2001 parliamentary elections Jamaat won 8 percent of the vote and entered a ruling coalition with the much larger Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) as junior partner. The Awami League, the country's other major secular party and fierce rival of the BNP, has been behind a recent nationwide campaign to discredit Jamaat by accusing its leaders of war crimes during the 1971 war of independence from Pakistan.

¶3. (SBU) In cyclone-devastated Patuakhali district, an assessment team of Department of Defense, Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development personnel was told repeatedly that local popular support for Jamaat in the region lags behind the BNP and Awami League. Additionally, all of the parties lag well behind the government in providing emergency relief, largely because of Emergency Rule restrictions on their activities and the anti-corruption campaign that has caused many political leaders to adopt a low profile. Among a crowd of about 75 people at a rice shop in Kalapara town, for example, only a handful said they had received any assistance from political parties. As we traveled through Patuakhali and Barguna districts in early February we typically met only a few people receiving aid from the parties. Wherever the team went, however, we met people who were receiving rice and home-rebuilding grants from the government that, while modest, far outstripped

anything offered by the parties.

14. (SBU) Still, the team found many examples of Jamaat providing aid, sometimes using its own resources and other times teaming up with other Islamic groups. Fakhruddin Khan Raji, vice president of Jamaat in Patuakhali district, said the party had distributed 350,000 taka (about USD 5,000) in funds to Sidr victims in the district. The interagency team witnessed 50,000 taka (about USD 714) handed out at a Kalapara madrassa on February 3 to 40 people who were accepting on behalf of local mosques damaged in the storm. At the same event, about 300 people crowded the school courtyard to receive household goods and clothing donated by the Kuwait Joint Relief Committee. In neighboring Barguna district, a Jamaat cadre in Amtali upazila (county) said the party distributed old clothes and blankets to Sidr victims. The cadre, Mowlana Mustafizur Rahman, said that immediately after the storm Jamaat central headquarters in Dhaka sent 10,000 taka (about USD 142) that was distributed to 100 hard hit families in Amtali; another 45,000 taka (about USD 643) was distributed to 15 families who lost their homes. Jamaat also distributed beef from four cows donated by two Islamist NGOs -- the World Assembly of Muslim Youth and Masjid Mission -- and slaughtered during the Eid holiday in December, a month after the cyclone. He also showed the team a room filled with 2,500 pairs of new shoes donated from the NGO Islamic Aid to be distributed to madrassa students and others by Jamaat.

15. (C) At the Kalapara madrassa distribution event, Fakhruddin showed himself to be a practiced orator and an imposing figure -- tall, burly and sporting a full, immaculately trimmed black-and-red beard. Standing on the madrassa porch overlooking the courtyard in a finely tailored punjabi and wearing a tall "tupi" white cap favored by the

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religious, he spoke forcefully and gestured emphatically as he urged the aid recipients not to become dependent on relief and to return to farming as soon as possible. The team had not expected to meet such a charismatic politician in a rural area considered to be a backwater.

16. (SBU) Fakhruddin told us Jamaat has 245 cadres and about 800 mid-level "workers" in Patuakhali district, which has about 1.5 million people. The cadres donate 5 percent of their income to Jamaat and devote 90 hours a month to party work; the workers tithe 2.5 percent of their income and recruit people to attend Jamaat events. In total, Jamaat has about 35,000 members in the district who are encouraged to donate money, work for the party and read Jamaat literature. Jamaat's student wing, Islami Chhatra Shibbir, also has a presence on local campuses; it claimed about 50 members out of 1,000-plus students at Mojaharuddin Biswas Degree College in Kalapara, where we met Fakhruddin. The team met several teachers who were Jamaat members at the many schools and madrassas we visited in the area, but Fakhruddin was insistent that the party did not provide funding to the institutions. Instead, he said, Jamaat provides an Islamic-content syllabus to supplement the government-approved syllabus at several Patuakhali madrassas. (Note: When the team visited one of those schools in Mithaganj, the Jamaat superintendent said the material was not available, perhaps believing it would harm his efforts to seek USG aid in repairing his cyclone-damaged madrassa. End Note.)

17. (C) Comment: Although Jamaat officials claim their cyclone assistance in Patuakhali and Barguna districts were targeted at anyone in need regardless of party loyalty, the relief distribution we viewed appeared to exclusively support the party faithful and local mosques, a natural constituency for the Islamist party. Given the modest amounts of assistance offered by Jamaat and the narrow scope of recipients, it appears unlikely that the cyclone relief will afford Jamaat an opportunity to expand its popularity. At best, the relief effort may strengthen its ties to existing supporters and to

a number of high-profile Islamist NGOs that teamed up with the party to distribute aid.
Pasi